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A new subspecies of Arabian Warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* from Israel

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During research on *Sylvia* warblers, a special study of the Arabian Warbler *Sylvia leucomelaena* was made in the field and by ringing in the Arava Valley, Israel, and by comparative examination of skins from Israel and those in the collection at the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH).

The Arabian Warbler, also known as Blanford's Warbler or Red Sea Warbler, was originally described by Hemprich & Ehrenberg (1833) and placed in the genus *Curruca*. Hartert (1917) placed it in *Parisoma*, and Meinertzhagen (1949) and all following authors placed it in the genus *Sylvia*. Afik (1984) doubted that it was a Sylvid warbler since its biological and some morphological characteristics differ from other members of the genus *Sylvia*. I believe that the Arabian Warbler is a species intermediate between the 2 genera *Parisoma* and *Sylvia*, but closer to the latter, where it is best left, at least at present.

The Arabian Warbler occurs on both sides of the Red Sea—in Arabia, Somalia and Sudan (Harrison 1982, Jennings 1981, Hall & Moreau 1970, Archer & Godman 1961)—in dry subtropical desert or semidesert, favouring acacia trees or large bushes near acacia trees.

There are 3 distinct subspecies, all rather similar:—

S.l. leucomelaena (Hemprich & Ehrenberg 1833). Distributed in southern and western Arabia north to 26°N, also possibly in Somalia. It is the darkest and largest of the 3 races (Table 1). Hartert (1917) described the birds collected in South Yemen as "*distincta*", but it is now considered that all birds found in the Arabian peninsula are *S.l. leucomelaena*. This population is the one nearest to Israel.

S.l. blanfordi (Seeböhm 1878). Distributed along the western Red Sea border from Sudan to Eritrea. Upperparts sandier greyish-brown, head very dark brown with a sharp division from the paler mantle, a contrast which is lacking in *leucomelaena* and *somaliensis*. The wing in *blanfordi* is the smallest, though there is still overlap with both *leucomelaena* and *somaliensis* (Table 1).

TABLE 1
Mensural data on the subspecies of *Sylvia leucomelaena*

<i>S.l. leucomelaena</i> —Arabia and Yemen					<i>S.l. blanfordi</i> —Sudan			
	n	Range	Av.	SD	n	Range	Av.	SD
wing	♂♂ 10	67.5–76.0	71.20	3.11	13	65.0–70.0	67.53	1.79
	♀♀ 11	67.0–72.0	68.36	2.33	10	65.0–67.0	65.80	0.78
tail	♂♂ 12	64.0–73.0	68.50	2.60	12	59.0–67.0	64.66	2.18
	♀♀ 10	60.0–68.0	65.60	2.36	8	56.0–63.0	61.12	2.29
w/t ratio	♂♂ 10	100.1–107.0	103.35	2.86	13	100.0–110.1	103.82	3.12
	♀♀ 10	100.0–111.6	104.44	3.76	8	104.8–117.8	107.85	4.12
bill-s	♂♂ 10	12.0–16.1	14.92	1.66	11	11.5–16.7	14.73	1.84
	♀♀ 9	14.0–16.7	16.16	0.98	9	12.0–16.6	14.96	1.59
bill-w	♂♂ 5	3.9–4.9	4.68	0.43	5	4.2–4.8	4.42	0.22
	♀♀ 5	3.9–4.9	4.38	0.43	6	3.8–4.5	4.26	2.27
tarsus	♂♂ 12	20.5–23.0	21.60	0.81	13	20.0–23.4	21.90	1.24
	♀♀ 10	20.3–24.5	21.59	1.40	10	20.5–24.0	22.20	1.19
<i>S.l. somaliensis</i> —Somalia					<i>S.l. negevensis</i> —Israel			
	n	Range	Av.	SD	n	Range	Av.	SD
wing	♂♂ 6	63.0–72.0	68.16	3.92	11	71.0–75.0	72.45	1.33
	♀♀ 6	65.0–68.0	66.50	1.37	9	67.0–72.0	69.61	1.83
tail	♂♂ 6	54.0–67.0	60.33	4.13	11	67.0–72.0	69.81	1.77
	♀♀ 6	56.0–64.0	60.66	2.87	9	62.0–72.0	66.11	3.58
w/t ratio	♂♂ 6	106.6–112.9	110.25	2.64	11	100.0–105.8	102.89	2.19
	♀♀ 6	106.2–116.0	109.68	3.43	9	101.4–112.9	106.10	4.23
bill-s	♂♂ 5	13.0–17.2	15.58	19.30	9	15.4–17.1	15.97	0.56
	♀♀ 6	14.0–17.9	16.50	14.40	8	15.3–18.0	16.45	0.90
bill-w	♂♂ 5	3.7–4.6	4.24	0.35	10	4.9–5.8	5.33	0.33
	♀♀ 6	3.8–4.5	4.20	0.43	7	4.2–5.6	5.08	0.33
tarsus	♂♂ 6	20.0–23.5	21.83	1.21	11	20.2–24.8	21.88	1.23
	♀♀ 6	21.0–23.6	22.20	1.11	7	20.3–22.6	21.31	0.76

S.l. somaliensis (Sclater & Mackworth-Praed 1918). Found only in Somalia. Its upperparts coloration and its measurements are intermediate between *leucomelaena* and *blanfordi*, closest to *leucomelaena*.

The Arabian Warbler in Israel

In the 1960s the Arabian Warbler was discovered breeding in the Arava Valley, Israel (Zehavi & Dudai 1974, Inbar 1975), at the northernmost limit of its range. Within Israel, it is found from 15 km north of Eilat along the Arava Valley to the south of the Dead Sea, and in particular at Hatzeva, the Shizhaf Reserve and Yotvata. It is resident, but first-winter birds disperse to Eilat and East Sinai.

Madge & Parr (1981) considered the Israeli race to be *S.l. blanfordi* in comparison in the field with individuals they had seen in Yemen. I have been able to compare in detail several hundred birds, including 40 caught in Israel, with skins taken at similar times of year and of similar age groups amongst specimens at the BMNH and find definite consistent differences between Israeli birds and *blanfordi*. The Israeli birds are an isolated population and at least as distinctive as the other 3 races, with a greater difference between the Israeli birds and the nominate race than there is between

the nominate race and *somaliensis*. They should be regarded as a separate race which I would name.

***Sylvia leucomelaena negevensis* subsp. nov.**

Holotype. Adult male; Hatzeva, 150 km north of Bay of Aqaba/Eilat, Israel. Collected by H. Shirihi 26 September 1986. Lodged in the British Museum (Natural History), Tring, BM No. 1987-20-1.

Measurement of type. Wing 73.0 mm, tail 72.0 mm, bill from base of skull 16.8 mm, tarsus 24.0 mm.

Description of holotype

Upperparts: mantle, scapulars, back, rump, and uppertail-coverts light grey with a slight brownish tone. The cap is black, gradually shading into light grey on the back, with no sharp boundary between cap and mantle. Wing coverts greyish-brown with pale grey fringes; remiges blackish-brown. Orbital ring black. The eye-ring contains both black and white feathers, forming an incomplete white eye-ring.

Underparts: throat and chin white, sides of body, under-tail coverts and belly white with a slight greyish tone, causing the clean white of the throat to stand out.

Tail: black, the outermost 3 retrices with white tips, the outermost having also white outer web edges.

Soft parts: Iris dark brown with pale greenish or whitish dots. Legs dark grey or dark bluish-grey, bill longer and wider than in the other races, mainly blackish with paler, bluish-grey base to lower mandible.

Material examined. 23 *leucomelaena* at BMNH from Yemen and Saudi Arabia; 23 *blanfordi* at BMNH from the Sudan; 12 *somaliensis* at BMNH from Somalia; 20 from Israel—3 in the Zoological Museum of the University of Tel Aviv, and 17 from the author's private collection, all of them collected in the Arava Valley in Israel between the Gulf of Aqaba/Eilat and the southern Dead Sea.

The comparisons were based on differences of plumage coloration and tail pattern, and measurements were taken of wing, tail, bill from skull, tarsus and bill width (from the back edge of the nostril). The comparisons were undertaken on skins of the same age and sex, which had been collected at the same time of year.

Measurements (Table 1). *S.l. negevensis* is largest of the subspecies, but there is considerable overlap. Its wing/tail ratio is smaller due to its longer tail.

Notes

S.l. negevensis differs from typical nominate *leucomelaena* in a less brown cap and the upperparts less brownish, more grey, and is paler and greyer even than *blanfordi*; the head is a blacker-brown than the latter's, but without the sharp boundary between the blackish-brown head and the greyer mantle. The blackish-brown head of *negevensis* contrasts

sharply with the white throat, and the general head pattern recalls that of an adult male Sardinian Warbler *S. melanocephala*. The wings are brown, contrasting with paler upperparts. The white eye-ring varies in completeness. The female is similar to the male, but browner, the eye-ring less prominent and always broken. The juvenile is like the adult female but the nape and crown are greyer, contrasting with darkish ear-coverts; there is no eye-ring, and a whitish area above the lores is age distinctive; the wing coverts have distinctive rusty fringes; tail without obvious white tips to outer feathers, merely a pale fringe to tip of the outermost.

Sexual dimorphism appears to be more marked in *negevensis* than in the other 3 subspecies. Most comparisons were made between *negevensis* and the nominate, which it most resembles. Adult females of *negevensis* in fresh plumage show more brownish tones to the back, mantle and scapulars than do males of the same subspecies, which are cleaner grey. The females have a brownish rather than blackish cap. Fresh plumages of the nominate, on the other hand, showed only very slight differences, if any between the sexes. In Arava Valley, Israel, it was relatively easy to differentiate between the sexes in *negevensis* even in the field.

It is necessary to emphasize the importance, at least in *S. leucomelaena*, of conducting comparisons only with birds of the same age, since, for example, third-winter females of *negevensis* attain a more greyish tone in the upperparts and thus resemble first-winter males.

The size difference in males and females of *negevensis* is small, and is similar in degree to that in the other 3 subspecies (Table 1).

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A new subspecies of *Pytilia melba* from Djibouti, East Africa

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During the course of the Djibouti II Autumn '85 Expedition, 4 days were spent in the Mabila mountains, 25 km west of Obock, primarily searching for the endemic Djibouti Francolin *Francolinus ochropectus*, but also surveying all the birdlife of this previously undocumented region.

On 17 November, in the region of the village of Goula (11°57'N, 43°00'E), 4 birds were encountered which resembled Green-winged *Pytilia* *Pytilia melba* but differed in several plumage characters. Photographs of a male were obtained the following day, along with additional notes on plumage, voice and habitat. On 23 November at least 8 birds resembling those observed on Mabila were found in Tôha (11°47'N, 42°43'E), a large wadi on the southern edge of the Forêt du Day, with an additional 3 birds at the junction of the Randa–Bankoualé road (11°50'N, 42°42'E) on 24 November. In both cases more photographs of males were obtained.

Following the expedition's return to Britain, these photographs were compared with skins of *P. melba* in the British Museum (Natural History), Tring (BMNH) and copies of the description of the Djibouti birds sent for comment to Derek Goodwin and Jurgen Nicolai, both of whom are well acquainted with the genus. From these researches, it would appear that the birds in Djibouti constitute a new subspecies of *P. melba* and a detailed description has been published in the Djibouti II Report (Welch *et al.* 1986: 111–118) and photographs of the holotype and paratypes are lodged in the Photographic Library of the BMNH—reference nos PL2001.1, 2002.1, 2003.1 and 2003.2. There we have proposed the name